

Planning Update

Comprehensive Conservation Plan National Elk Refuge

Issue 2, March 2011

Summary of Public Scoping

What is scoping? As defined by the National Environmental Policy Act, scoping is “an early and open process for determining the scope of issues to be addressed and for identifying the significant issues.” The scoping process provides a forum for recognizing public and agency concerns and issues that help guide development of alternative approaches to refuge management.

To recruit public involvement in the planning process for a comprehensive conservation plan (CCP), the Service published “Planning Update, Issue 1,” with information about the CCP process, public involvement and scoping, and the time and location of a public meeting held January 11, 2011, in Jackson, Wyoming.

Public Comments

The Service has made every effort to capture all comments made at the public meeting on January 11, 2011, as well as comments received by telephone, email, fax, and U.S. mail. Because the objective of the scoping process is to identify the issues to be addressed, every comment is equally important to us.

All of the questions, comments, and concerns we received were compiled and organized by topic area.

We would like to thank the many people who shared their comments during the public scoping process. The Service received more than 200 comments in the form of emails, letters, comment forms, personal visits, and phone calls. This planning update summarizes what

“I really appreciate the opportunity for my concerns to be heard.”



Bluebells

USFWS

we heard and describes the next steps in the CCP process.

We identified key issues following the analysis of all comments collected during scoping. Comments are summarized below under broad topic headings.

Landscape Conservation

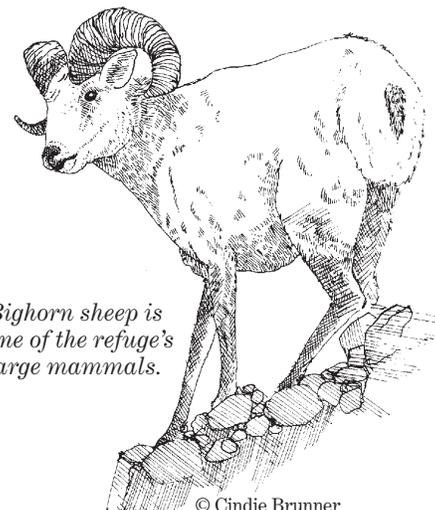
To better understand and track climate-induced change on ecosystem components, some commenters wanted the

CCP to include a program for inventory and monitoring on the refuge. A few people suggested that environmental education programs incorporate findings from research on climate change.

Many comments focused on the need to preserve lands next to the refuge to reduce habitat fragmentation, improve habitat connectivity, and maintain historical wildlife corridors. Some people suggested this could be accomplished by using conservation easements or acquiring lands adjacent to the refuge.

Habitat

There were numerous comments about habitat quality, and they mostly focused on the need for healthy riparian and wetland habitats on the refuge. Other comments identified issues such as the need to control invasive plant species, restore native plant communities, and restore impaired watercourses throughout the refuge.



Bighorn sheep is one of the refuge's large mammals.

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“The habitat improvements made have increased the variety of species now present. This confirms that it is truly a refuge for wildlife that remains intact today.”

Wildlife

Many commenters expressed that the CCP needs to consider and carry out appropriate conservation measures for migratory birds and native wildlife in the refuge including amphibians, fish, bighorn sheep, moose, elk, and beaver. Some of the comments highlighted specific management issues such as wildlife disease that could spread off the refuge, from elk to cattle, as well as disease that could come onto the refuge and affect elk herds. Other concerns were population levels—too high or too low—and the need to reestablish populations of native wildlife.

The CCP needs to address threatened and endangered species and species of concern. In particular, comments specified the continued care and maintenance of trumpeter swan populations, nesting, and habitat quality. Because of a concern that human activity may affect nesting swans, some commenters said that monitoring to determine actual effects is important.

Addressing the presence of wolves on the refuge was also a major topic, but opinions differed greatly on how to best manage local wolf populations, particularly regarding wolf predation on wintering elk populations.

Visitor Services

Of all the public comments, most were about visitor service programs. Topics ranged from hunting and fishing on the refuge to refuge access, public outreach, and environmental education.

Some people expressed a desire to continue current hunting programs on the refuge. Others requested that hunting be prohibited on the refuge. One suggestion was to consider measures to mitigate the negative visual impact of elk hunting on the refuge. Another commenter suggested conducting a limited waterfowl hunt to control resident Canada goose populations.

Of the numerous comments about public access to the refuge, many expressed the desire for increased access for wildlife observation, interpretation, and environmental education purposes. This included the need for more refuge access points, improved parking areas, more observation opportunities and facilities, and more roads maintained.

“The North Highway 89 Pathway offers a superb opportunity to provide environmental education and interpretation of the Elk Refuge resources.”

Public commenters had vastly differing opinions about the bike path along Highway 89. Some people expressed a desire for increased access to the pathway and elimination of the seasonal closure of the bike path; others supported the seasonal closure. Many people wanted the pathway system expanded, so it could link to other regional pathways. A few commenters requested access to national forest land bordering the refuge.

Scenic Quality

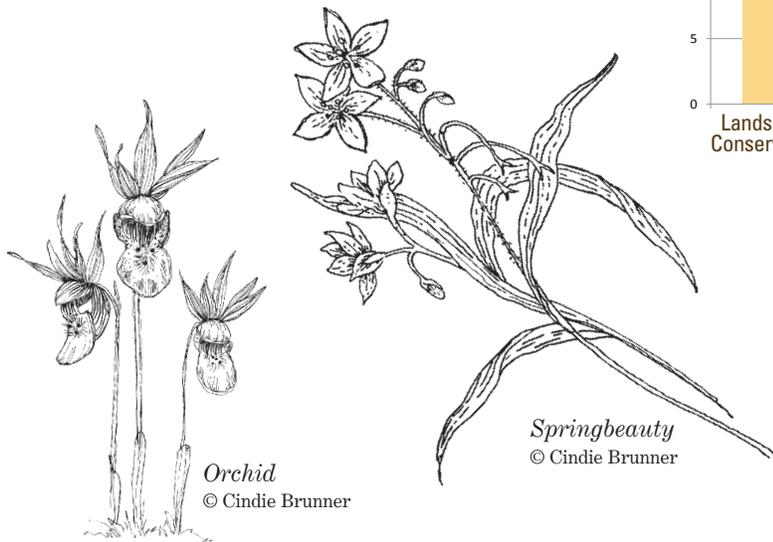
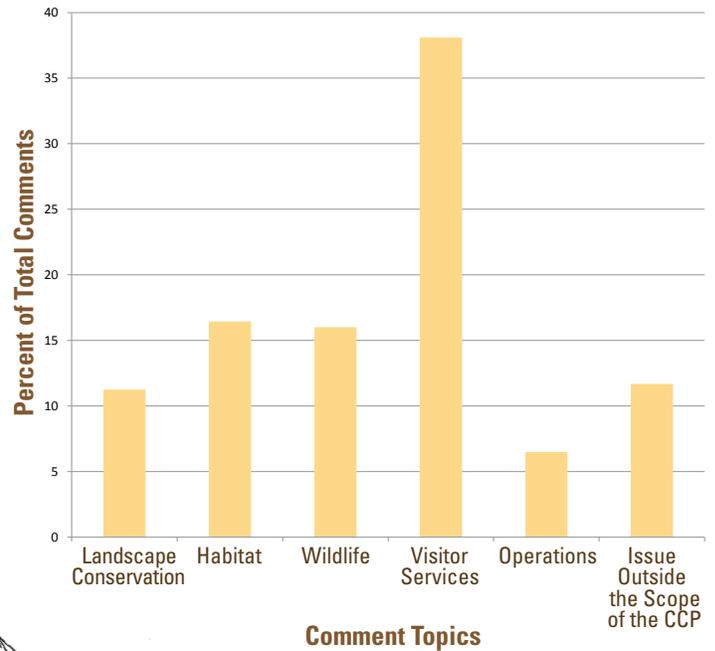
Many comments mentioned the need to preserve the scenic quality of the area. The public requested that the CCP require inventory and monitoring of facilities and infrastructure such as the irrigation system, fences, and power lines. Commenters want the Service to consider ways to minimize the negative visual effects of facilities and infrastructure on the refuge.



Landowners share ideas with Service staff during a public meeting held January 11 in Jackson, Wyoming.

Issue Outside the Scope of the CCP

Although the public identified bison and elk management as an issue during scoping for the CCP, the issue is outside the scope of this CCP process. Managing bison and elk in this area was recently addressed in an interagency, environmental analysis process that had extensive public involvement. The resulting “Bison and Elk Management Plan—National Elk Refuge, Grand Teton National Park” was completed in 2007. The plan has goals, objectives, and strategies for managing bison and elk at the National Elk Refuge and the Grand Teton National Park for the next 15 years. The CCP will be consistent with the bison and elk plan. Supplemental winter feeding of the elk herd is addressed in the bison and elk plan.



Next Steps

The next phase of the planning process includes developing and analyzing alternatives for management of the refuge.

We encourage you to stay involved in the planning process and to provide input on the draft plan when the Service makes it available for public review. The Service will use the following outreach methods to keep in touch with you—planning updates, local media, public meetings, and the project Web page (www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/planning/ccp/wy/ner/ner.html).

Planning Timeline



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Solitary Bull Elk
Ryan Hagerty/USFWS



“I highly value the diverse, abundant wildlife of the National Elk Refuge, as well as the scenic qualities, open space, and clear air and water.”

Columbine
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RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED